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SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [ECON](#) [EWWT](#) [MARR](#) [EG](#)

SUBJECT: EGYPT FERRY DISASTER UPDATE

REF: A. EMBASSY CAIRO - OPS CENTER TELCONS

[1](#)B. 05 CAIRO 08036

Sensitive But Unclassified. Please protect accordingly.

Summary

[1](#)1. (SBU) Despite some recent rescues, hopes are fading for the approximately 830 passengers still missing after the sinking of the Egyptian passenger ferry "Al Salam Boccacio 98" during its transit from Dubah, Saudi Arabia to Safaga, Egypt. Embassy Cairo has been in close contact with GOE counterparts to offer condolences, offer and coordinate assistance in search and rescue and the investigation, and to confirm that no Americans were known to be involved in the disaster. The GOE has been appreciative of U.S. efforts in aiding the search and rescue, noting that the U.S. was the first nation to offer assistance. END SUMMARY.

Update

[1](#)2. (SBU) As of February 5, many questions remain as to the exact cause of the February 3 sinking of the Egyptian passenger Ferry "Al Salam Boccacio 98." Rescue efforts are ongoing, with MoD contacts informing OMC that one further survivor was rescued at approximately 1500 hrs local time on February 5. Despite that, the number of victims far exceeds the number of rescued, and the final death toll will approach 1,000. Ministry of Transport officials are in the port of Safaga to help coordinate rescue efforts and begin the investigation process.

[1](#)3. (SBU) As unrest continues in Safaga between passengers' families and Egyptian police, the GOE has provided few details as to the formation of an investigation team, although industry contacts tell us that a broad panel is being formed that will include private sector and academic participants. Ministry of Transport officials are stating that a fire in one of the car parking areas precipitated the incident, but survivor accounts are pointing to serious breaches of safety protocols aboard the aging ferry. One of the ferry's sister ships, the "Al Salam 95," sunk in October 2005 after colliding with a Cypriot cargo ship near the southern entrance of the Suez Canal (Ref B), albeit with minimal casualties.

USG/MFO Response

[1](#)4. (SBU) Upon learning of the incident on Friday, February 3 around 1245 hrs Cairo time, Embassy sections reached out to GOE counterparts, industry contacts, coalition military allies and the MFO. CONS contacted Egyptian State Security to request a passenger manifest and receive an initial estimate of casualties and breakdown of passenger nationalities. State Security responded about 60 minutes later, indicating that there was possibly one Canadian among the passengers but apparently no Amcits on board. CONS and ConGen Jeddah confirmed through host nation contacts that there were no known Amcits aboard the ferry. Egyptian State Security announced that of the 1,318 manifested passengers and crew, there were 1201 Egyptians (including 99 crew members), 99 Saudis, 6 Syrians, 4 Palestinians, 1 Omani, 1 Emirati, 1 Yemeni, 1 Sudanese, 1 Indonesian, 1 Jordanian and 1 Canadian on board.

[1](#)5. (SBU) Cairo Naval Attache contacted NAVCENT Bahrain to inquire about available assets to assist in the operation. NAVCENT initially ordered the UK warship the HMS Bulwark to turn around and head to the site and assist operations, with an estimated 36-48 hours steaming time to sunken ferry's position. Cairo DAO contacted Egyptian Navy Commodore Mamdouh to ask if the Egyptian Armed Forces desired assistance in the search and rescue operation if USG assets were in a position to respond. After initially turning down assistance, the GOE asked for help. When conveying Egypt's willingness to accept the assistance, Commodore Mamdouh expressed the GOE's appreciation and noted that the U.S. was the first country to offer assistance.

16. (SBU) NAVCENT recalled the HMS Bulwark when word arrived that the USNS Benavidez was transiting the Suez Canal on February 4 and would be redirected to the rescue mission, arriving at approximately the same time estimated for the Bulwark. The USNS Benavidez passed through the area but did not report any sightings of bodies, wreckage or survivors.

17. (SBU) NAVCENT also readied a Djibouti-based U.S. Navy P-3 aircraft awaiting GOE request for assistance. Upon receipt of the request for assistance from Commodore Mamdouh, the aircraft was sortied at 2100 hrs February 3, arriving on station at about 0500 February 4 to begin operations with Egyptian Navy and MFO assets on the scene. MFO dispatched two Italian ships from Sharm El Sheikh, a Twin Otter aircraft and a UH-60. The MFO vessels, working with the airborne P-3 aircraft, rescued 8 survivors and recovered 3 dead. The P-3 stayed until about 1630 on February 4 and returned to base due to mechanical problems. The aircraft was prepared to return but the GOE did not request that it do so.

18. (SBU) Legatt is in communication with FBI Headquarters to determine what, if any, technical assistance or resources could be brought to bear if requested by the GOE. DAO passed to Commodore Mamdouh the NTSB's offer of sending a maritime investigation officer to assist with the inquiry. Mamdouh said he would consult with the various stakeholder ministries. A/DCM also passed this offer to the Ministry of Transportation. ECPO reiterated Embassy condolences and offers of U.S. assistance to the office of Admiral Shireen Hassan, head of the Maritime Transport Sector of the Ministry of Transportation. Admiral Hassan is currently in Safaga managing Egyptian response efforts. PA posted a press release on the Embassy website offering condolences and re-emphasizing U.S. support, and handled press inquiries.

Initial Press Reactions

19. (SBU) The ferry disaster garnered immediate international and domestic press attention. As of February 4, all papers and television news led with the story of the ship's disappearance and Mubarak's visit to Hurghada. Television images showed protesting families stoning police at port stations, and both satellite and terrestrial stations hosted transportation and safety officials on evening talk shows describing compensation schemes for victims' families, and defending against accusations of a lack of safety standards. By February 5, commentators in independent and pro-government papers began critical remarks about the government's response. For example, columns in Al-Masry Al-Yom railed against the government's "rush to make denials about the sunken ferry before an investigation has been conducted", while Al-Ahram published a call on the government "to deal with the catastrophe openly and honestly" and Al-Akhbar printed the claim that "accidents happen not coincidentally, but as the result of a long history of negligence and poor planning." Al-Gomhuriyya published columns supporting the government and praising Mubarak "for standing by the people in the disaster" and "encouraging the search and rescuing of many people."

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